



World's Youngest 1000km Diploma Glider Pilot

ALEX McCaw is a third generation glider pilot and at the age of eighteen he is making his own mark in the sport. On 11 December 2010 he flew an epic eleven hour and forty minute flight in difficult conditions to complete a task most older pilots have never even attempted. Two other pilots also attempted the same task that day and didn't get around. Sheer tenacity kept Alex going, even when it didn't appear that he would get back from his southern turn-point.

Alex's immediate family, plus uncles and cousins are all glider pilots. Starting gliding himself at the age of fourteen he quickly became involved with Youth Glide Canterbury and youth gliding camps at Omarama. "I love gliding; there's a lot of skill involved in staying up. It's cool to be able to use the atmosphere to get you these great distances, rather than using thousands of dollars worth of petrol. There's also a big advantage to having a group of young pilots around to fly with and be competitive with. We push each other along."

"I wanted to be the youngest person to do a 1000 km flight," Alex said. "We set a task flying a circuit between Lumsden and the top of the Rangitata River, and we were going to do that twice. The start/finish line was at Glentanner."

The plan was to try to stay between 10,000 and 20,000 feet, using wave, thermals and ridge soaring to get around the task. Alex spent the entire day before preparing for the journey, pulling together everything he'd need for a long cold flight, with every expectation of a land-out.

Two other pilots joined Alex in the attempt, setting off in weather conditions that were less than ideal. "It was blue wave, so there weren't many clouds around," Alex said.

Launching from Omarama they made their way to the start point at Glentanner. From there the circuit led down the lee of the Dunstan Range. "That part was quite difficult," Alex said. "The wind was coming from the west and I couldn't quite work out what the clouds were doing. I flew down to Clyde, pushed upwind to get into wave which ran down the Waikaia Valley. It was really difficult; there weren't any clouds, but I hit the turn point in Waiparu and flew exactly the same route back past Omarama and up."

After that, Alex said, it got fun: "From Omarama to Mt. Cook the flying was the easiest of the trip. I was beating everyone going into the Ben Ohau Range and the view is always amazing up there. I got to 22,000 feet and it was very cold. I hit the second turn at Mt. D'Archiac, pushed back into wind and followed wave down to the mouth of the Lindis, then back into the lee of the Dunstans."

Contributed by Jill McCaw and Carrie Miller

The most challenging part of the journey was the mental preparation to concentrate for the better part of 12 hours. "You're constantly watching the weather, looking ahead, trying to figure out where to go and how you're going to get there," Alex said. "If you lose your concentration for a moment, you can end up making

mistakes and just one little mistake during these long flights can set you back an hour, and then you don't have enough time to finish."

Alex almost became unstuck when he returned to Clyde and found the weather had completely changed. "Suddenly a southerly had come up and there was no wave and only a few thermals. I glided out to the turn point and then ridge soared up the Garvie Range, which was quite scary. I was just above the ridge. I fluffed around there for ages and thought, Great – I might not be able to make it back to Omarama, but at least I can make it to Cromwell and not have to land out in a paddock somewhere, then I managed to climb out in convergency, wavy stuff and made my way up to 10,000 feet. That saved me."

However the task wasn't through with Alex yet. Without any wave, Alex ridge soared up the Lindis Ridge. "I thought there was just enough daylight left to give it a try, and then I found wave in the Maitland and again in Dobson, and I got to my finishing point at Glentanner."

With only 20 minutes of daylight

left Alex elected to land at Pukaki Airfield as he would not get back to Omarama in time. A landing after CET would nullify his claim.

Alex was welcomed by several carloads of friends, family and fellow pilots who helped the exhausted young pilot celebrate his success, showering him with champagne.

"I was pretty happy," Alex said. "I didn't think I'd achieve it at this age, maybe not on a first attempt anyway. The other two didn't make it around. I'm competitive, so I was happy I was beating them, but I wanted them to finish too."

It is an extraordinary start to an aviation career. Alex went on to spend the following week at the inaugural Youth Soaring and Development camp and then in January attended the Walsh Memorial Flying School as a returning member in a leadership role. He is now starting a BSc at the University of Canterbury and plans to eventually undertake postgraduate work in Meteorology. In the meantime he will keep flying gliders. His goal is to be a World Champion glider pilot.



Alex McCaw being congratulated by cousin Richie after his record flight.



At 20,000 feet with Mt. Cook in the distance.